

Cambodian experience makes lasting impression

For Melbourne GP Dr Lester Mascarenhas, being one of the few practitioners providing health care to some of Cambodia's poorest communities was a confronting yet inspiring experience.



Dr Lester Mascarenhas with mother and child at the clinic in Prey Thom village, Cambodia



Young boy at the Operation Nightingale rural clinic, Prey Thom village

Dr Lester Mascarenhas was part of a seven-member medical team of volunteers, organised by charity Awareness Cambodia, who visited the south-east Asian country's poorest province, Kampong Speu in September.

We are on a bone-rattling journey in a four-wheel drive over dirt roads dotted with potholes.

Suddenly, the jeep comes to a screeching halt, throwing my colleague, fellow GP Dr Mark Flynn, across my lap.

Around us, foliage glistens in the warm rain, the mountains are shrouded in clouds, and the expectant faces of a several hundred Khmer women, men and children appear. We have arrived.

Pregnant women hold their bellies, elderly men flash us their toothless smiles and children peer shyly from behind their parents.

The scene is reminiscent more of a community social gathering than a clinic. We are in Prey Thom village. It is just 50 kilometres from the capital, Phnom Penh – about a two-and-a-half drive. But it might as well be a world away.

The village is part of Kampong Speu

province, which is the poorest in Cambodia.

Awareness Cambodia's Operation Nightingale project – which operates four permanent and two mobile clinics – is the only source of medical care in this impoverished and remote area, and it is two years since the last team of volunteers came through. There is a lot to do.

With me are six other volunteers from Australia – emergency physician and clinical toxicologist Dr Kerry Hoggett, fellow GP Dr Flynn, three registered nurses (Nancy Kennedy, Erin Clapham and Emma Larter) and dentist and Awareness Cambodia Chief Executive Officer Dr Gary Hewett – as well as six local practitioners: three GPs, two dermatologists and a nurse.

Our clinic has been organised by the Cambodian Health Department and we

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Operation Nightingale volunteer medical team, top row (L to R): Dr Kerry Hoggett, Emma Larter, Nancy Kennedy and Dr Mark Flynn. Bottom row (L to R): Erin Clatham, Dr Lester Mascarenhas and Dr Gary Hewett



Young girl outside Operation Nightingale clinic in Kompong Speu province, Cambodia

set up in the local school; triage in one room, the pharmacy in another, and the remainder used for treatment.

For the next five hours we work in collaboration with our Cambodian colleagues - doctors, medical students, pharmacy assistants, nurses and Health officials – treating common complaints such as gastritis, skin rashes, cataracts, parasitic infections, draining abscesses, dressing wounds and burns, as well as distributing basics such as toothbrushes, soap, used spectacles and continence aids.

Altogether, we treated 284 patients.

This was just one of three mobile clinics we provided in remote areas, as well as assisting at Awareness Cambodia's four permanent clinics.

After two weeks with Awareness Cambodia I had interesting stories to tell and new friends.

We were a colourful lot – five on the medical team and a dozen or so on the maintenance team [which carries out building and maintenance work at the Sunshine House orphanage]. Among us was a chap had never before visited a developing country, a vegetarian nurse and an emergency department physician with plenty of experience working in

south east Asia.

We saw a face of the country that tourists will never see.

Visiting Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum was a memorable experience, as was dancing at the nightclub on the beach in Sihanoukville.

The maintenance team had some very fond memories of spending time with the children at Sunshine House, and we joined the others at Sunshine House towards the end of our trip for the annual Sunshine House concert – performance by the Awareness Cambodia team is compulsory...!

For me, the experiences in the mobile clinics will be the ones that I will always remember.

The valuable lessons learnt from the Cambodian medical students and doctors on how to work when resources are limited; the joy and legacy of sharing knowledge with the medical students and, most of all, the realisation of the pernicious effects of unequal global wealth distribution, where access to the most basic health care is denied to our fellow humans in the developing world.

In Cambodia, life expectancy is 65 years –

a dismal 17 years less than in Australia.

As I strive to earn more and more in Australia, my experiences in Cambodia made me ask myself: will my life really be any better if I had more money? Surely, if I was faced with the choice of buying a bigger house or investing my time and money in volunteering with Awareness Cambodia and providing my fellow humans with the health care that is their right, what would I choose? What would you choose?

In September each year, Awareness Cambodia sends a team of up to eight volunteer health workers and 16 maintenance workers to Cambodia for two weeks to conduct clinics and carry out necessary maintenance and building work. Volunteers provide their time and expertise free of charge, and make a \$3000 donation to the organisation. Clinical and pharmacy supplies are funded through the Operation Nightingale project.

Those interested in volunteering are invited to attend a meeting and submit an expression of interest. Medical professionals interested in the volunteer program can contact Awareness Cambodia on +61 8 9370 1457 or cambodia@awarecam.org.au.

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